



The Fascination of Flight

Noise, Filth, Stench

by Alexander Linz

“The smell of kerosene is the perfume of expensive air travel,” my former flying teacher and good friend Walter Hanel told me at the beginning of my career as a private pilot, when, as was our habit, we were philosophizing about the world of flight. I still recall it all quite clearly. We were sitting in a tiny Cessna 150 on a very hot and humid day, flying our umpteenth loop around the airfield, practicing takeoffs and landings. I had to complete about 40 hours of training in this two-seater. I also had to study plenty of interesting (and sometimes uninteresting) theory and spend many unforgettable days at numerous airfields. But then the big day finally arrived. August 25, 1992 was a gorgeous summer day at LOAT (Trausdorf in Burgenland, Austria), a perfect day to take the PPL exam for certification as a private pilot. Many years have passed, I’ve logged hundreds of hours in my flight book, and the LOAT airstrip has since been closed due to conflicts with its neighbors. But my teacher’s sentence still echoes in my mind – even though I’ve never flown a kerosene-fueled aircraft.

I earned my pilot’s license 14 years ago, and ever since I’ve been clattering through the air. *Clatter* is indeed the right word, because the piston engines of the planes I’m allowed to fly really call attention to themselves. They’re not as quiet and “noble” as modern turbines and jet engines. It’s peculiar – the fascinating world of flight begins with clatter. It’s this racket at a civilian-aviation airfield, emanating from the four- or six-cylinder motors of Continentals or Lycomings with their combinations of either a two- or three-blade propeller (e.g., McCauley or Hartzell), that some people actually perceive as noise. The sound doesn’t bother me at all. In fact, it’s music to my ears. A trained ear can easily distinguish a Cessna from a Piper. A Mooney makes different music. And the legendary Spitfire with its Rolls-Royce-Merlin 12-cylinder motor sounds as noble as the Vienna



Lufthansa and the Swiss airline JU-Air still operate a small fleet today

Philharmonic. Every airplane produces its own distinctive sound. Just as a mother walrus can distinguish her cub's cries from the thousands of other squealing babies in the colony, and just as a virtuoso violinist can tell a Stradivarius from all other fiddles, so too can an experienced pilot close his eyes and identify the makes of the various aircraft idling on an airstrip.

But the "noise" is only ostensibly a deterrent. It's exacerbated by the fact that an airfield is anything but clean. The moment a pilot so much as touches his aircraft, he has already dirtied his fingertips. But that's no problem. Just the opposite – it's addictive! A private pilot's preparatory ritual begins when he pushes his plane out of the hangar. He then conducts the obligatory exterior and safety checks, verifies the levels of liquids, and finally fills his craft's tank with fuel. Before that, while his hands were still clean, he would have conducted his flight preparations, phoned the weather office, consulted the internet and perhaps submitted a flight plan. Lastly, after cleaning his hands, he can taxi down the runway and take off – *mounting* is the word I use, like mounting a horse for a ride in the country. You quickly put on your headset, listen to the radio with its endless litany of continually updated takeoff information, contact the apron controllers and/or the tower, read the first checklists, start the motor, receive clearance and begin to taxi, go through additional checklists, conduct the obligatory motor check, roll into the runway and wait to hear the phrase "cleared for takeoff." The feeling at this moment is unique: your mind is

totally concentrated and you can hardly wait to rise into the air. You finally receive clearance from the tower. A gentle headwind is blowing, and you're ready to roll! You take another quick glance at your instruments, you push the gas lever forward, the motor revs to full speed, and your airplane begins to move. Depending on the type of aircraft, sooner or later it achieves its liftoff speed. In pilot's lingo we say that it starts to "rotate." You pull gently on the steering column, lose contact with solid ground under your wheels, and nothing can stop you now. Regardless of whether you're flying for pleasure or toward a particular destination, the feeling of flight is unique. It's addictive. And it doesn't end until you've pushed your aircraft back into its hangar.

The Air Marshal and His Spitfire

When pilots get together, they always have plenty of stories to tell. It was no different the first time I met Cliff Spink. A retired Royal Air Force pilot with a pension in the "air marshal" range (which corresponds to lieutenant-general, Germany's second-highest-ranking general rank), he enjoys the privilege of being one of about 100 pilots worldwide who are allowed to fly a Spitfire. This single-seat interceptor has a cult status that Cliff describes as a "very strong personality." "The Spitfire is a thoroughbred airplane," he explains. "Modern jets are dehumanized by comparison." Cliff ought to know, because he has clocked more than 6,000 hours of piloting. During his active career with the Royal Air Force, he flew practically every propeller and jet plane there is. Nowadays he flies at air shows and administers exams.

The Spitfire's maiden flight was on March 5, 1936. As the decades passed, the British manufacturer Supermarine produced about 20,300 Spitfires in 24 different "Mark" versions and sub-variants. The "Mark II" and "Mark V" were the most frequently manufactured models. Many of the subsequent "Mark" designations systematically provide information about improvements made in the cell and undercarriage, and about the use of newer, stronger motors. A small number of so-called "Seafire" aircraft were built to fly from aircraft carriers. This seagoing Spitfire, however, never enjoyed much success; it had a comparatively high accident rate due to the rearward shift of its center of gravity, its narrow wheelbase, and its not especially stable undercarriage. Several land-based specimens of the Spitfire remained on active duty with the RAF until the 1950s, when they were retired from service.

Nowadays a small and selective community of enthusiastic owners and groups of co-owners operate the remaining flight-worthy Spitfires. What I wouldn't give to be in that group of 100 pilots who are authorized to fly Spitfires. I did not allow myself to fantasize too wildly. I knew I could, at least, hear the rich sound of a Spitfire on the ground, watch it





Air Marshal Cliff Spink is one of 100 pilots worldwide allowed to fly the legendary Spitfire



take off and observe the lucky fellow in the cockpit fly his maneuvers in the vicinity of the airfield.

I had my long-awaited opportunity to experience a Spitfire at close range when IWC debuted its new pilot's watches in January 2006. Despite the icy weather, I was burning with enthusiasm – and with envy – as I watched Cliff Spink put his Spitfire through its paces in the sky above the airfield. When this hero of the air returned to terra firma, I asked him what it is that makes flying so fascinating for him: “It’s the freedom to conquer a dimension that remains hidden from others. It’s the chance to temporarily leave the world’s problems below you. And it’s also flying in the Northern Lights, in incredible seas of colors and clouds. It’s only an escape at first, but it soon becomes a full-fledged addiction.”

Free at Last

When an airplane leaves the ground below it, its pilot leaves everyday life behind him. When I flew in Europe, the USA or the Caribbean and gazed down at the world stretched out below me, it was always a little adventure that I was privileged to experience. It was never a simple, everyday act. Even veteran professional pilots will tell you that flying never becomes routine, even though nowadays ultramodern cockpits do much of a pilot’s work for



The JU's three aft motors generate vibrations that make their surroundings tremble

him and numerous onboard computers degrade us humans into mere observers much of the time. But the impulse, the initial spark, always comes from a human being. Without us, without our will and our deeds, nothing would happen.

I won't suffer dehumanization because computers and computer displays haven't yet found their way into little planes. I've got to maintain my altitude and keep on course by hand. Several times I've had the pleasure of flying in modern cockpits equipped with the latest instruments, but the vast majority of aircraft within my reach are nowhere near that level of automation. And I can live perfectly well with that. Because it's precisely this old-fashioned immediacy that contributes to the fascination. Whether I reach my destination or not depends on my own skill and ability.

There comes a point for someone like me, for whom flying is a hobby, when you have to decide what course to take. Either you choose to remain humble, to stay within the limits of the experience you've gained during your hours in the air, to be reasonable and reach your destination, or you yearn to fly progressively larger aircraft and are willing to spend a whole lot of money. In my opinion, operating a single-engine airplane under potentially adverse instrument-flight conditions only makes sense if you can combine it with your career or if you can earn money doing it. Furthermore, you

mustn't neglect your training and your continuing education. The risk of encountering serious problems is, unfortunately, greater under such conditions, even if most people would prefer not to believe it. I decided not to take this further step. I want to enjoy many more years of safely cruising through the air under VFR conditions.

The Junkers JU 52

"Tante JU" ("Aunt JU") is the German nickname for this old-timer. Because of its instrumentation, it only flies under VFR conditions. For many years, IWC has sponsored a JU 52 that belongs to a local company called "JU-Air" at the airstrip in Dübendorf, which is located in the immediate vicinity of Zurich's international airport. The JU first made headlines in the year 2000, when IWC sponsored an attempted round-the-world flight. Everything was meticulously planned; each stretch of the globe-girdling route was precisely calculated; the best pilots were recruited for the adventurous undertaking. But the daring project ultimately failed, because Russian authorities steadfastly refused to grant the JU the right to fly over Russian territory. The Swiss petitioned, they begged, they cajoled, even arranged to have celebrities intervene on their behalf. But the Russians remained stubborn. That's a pity, really, because nearly all of the other stretches had already been completed and a place in the record book seemed to be within reach.

The JU 52 has three nine-cylinder radial engines and a wingspan of 29.25 meters, which combine to give it the ability to leave the ground after taxiing just 450 meters. This airplane numbers among the truly great legends of the air. A flight aboard one of these planes is a must for every aviation enthusiast. You simply have to experience it once in your life. The wild sound of its radial engines, the vibrations they produce in the cabin (which contains just 17 seats), and the experience of gliding elegantly along at 180 km/h – all this is, quite simply, incomparable. Flying a JU still means real work for the two pilots in its cockpit; there are no modern aids aboard, except a simple GPS receiver to facilitate navigation. We call that "pure flying," and it includes that special "something."

A Twinkle in the Eyes

The blend of ingredients that constitute flying is a heady and addictive cocktail. Anyone who has conquered the third dimension, to any degree of intensity, will always yearn to return to the air and experience this indescribable thrill again. Anyone who longs to actively explore the world and to get to know it from a bird's-eye view simply wants to do it over and over again, with no ifs, ands or buts about it. Nor would I want to do without the surroundings: the noise (I mean, music!) of the airfield, the dozens of manually executed phases in the preparation, the grimy hands.



The JU 52 can take off and land on very short runways

And the aroma of kerosene, the “perfume of costly air travel,” is a scent I’ve learned to love.

Toward the close of our lengthy and candid conversation, I asked veteran Air Marshal Cliff Spink to share his opinion about what characteristics, in his view, distinguish a really good pilot. “In the past as well as in the present day, military pilots of military aircraft have always been what you might describe as ‘gladiators of the air.’ They’re courageous and ambitious. They’re disciplined and imaginative. And they’re capable of making decisions in mere fractions of a second.” I ask him what he regards as the principal attributes that characterize a good civilian pilot. He replies, “In principle, they’re the same qualities, but in different proportions. Aviators in general have always been – and still are – rather special characters. They love life. Most of them are colorful or even eccentric guys. They consciously avoid vulgarity. They like to have fun and they know how to have a good time. And, of course, they have that famous twinkle in their eyes. The same spirit unites us worldwide.” When I ask him about his own personal motto, Cliff answers, “Memories are better than dreams.” That statement says a great deal about the joy that you can find when you live the dream of flight on a daily basis.